

What can you do to help?

When Someone Close to You Has a Serious Illness



When someone we love faces a serious illness our entire life is affected, both at home and in the workplace. Serious illness can bring many changes, emotions, and challenges might spill into work life. A wide range of intense emotions shakes us daily: shock, fear, love, guilt, hope, anger, deep sadness and grief, and a yearning for our earlier life when everyone was healthy.

People who face serious illness in their family often become overwhelmed by ordinary work demands. Many people might feel distracted at work, irritable and impatient with colleagues and unable to concentrate. Work tasks that once seemed vital can now appear trivial next to the enormity of illness at home.

These are normal and healthy responses to the challenge of a health crisis affecting a family member or close friend. The illness of a loved one will at times overshadow all other concerns, but there are ways to help you manage the challenges. The following are suggestions that come from others who have lived through serious illness while continuing to work.

What can be helpful?

Find someone to talk to. Whether it be with a friend, a religious leader, a counsellor, or a trusted family member, talking helps name and manage strong emotions. Some people find their biggest support with work colleagues, while others will not want to share any details at work.

Find others who are facing a similar illness. While everyone is different, people who have faced a similar illness have a life experience that is invaluable. They can give you suggestions about coping, treatment options, and what to expect. Medical information and education from national organizations can be found on the internet.

Tell your immediate supervisor. Whoever you talk to, make sure you let your supervisor know what is happening. Whether you are aware of it or not, your work will be affected, and your supervisor can help you re-balance work expectations with your new demands.

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Take care of yourself physically. This may sound simple but many people ignore their own well-being when a loved one is ill. It is important that you maintain your physical and emotional balance, both for your personal benefit and the benefit of your family. Pay attention to what you eat, and how much sleep and exercise you get each day. Stay active as much as possible.

Don't lose hope. Serious illness affecting a loved one is extremely difficult to accept and brings with it unfamiliar decisions that need to be considered. It takes time just to understand and adapt to all the new information facing you. Fortunately, there are many resources that can help. Call the Assistance Program to speak to a professional, available 24/7.

“If there's anything I can do...”

Often people shy away from colleagues going through a personal crisis, not knowing how to help or what to say. They are so afraid of saying or doing the wrong thing that they end up avoiding the very person who need care, attention, and the support of others. So what can you do to help someone you know who is facing serious illness? Here are some simple suggestions:

Be available. One of the best things a colleague can do is just be available if needed. Let your affected colleague know that if there is anything you can do to support them, that you will assist whenever you can.

Listen. When a colleague wishes to talk, you can be helpful by actively listening. Attend to what they need to talk about, even

if they repeat many of their stories. Sometimes, just listening to their personal story and experience can provide some comfort for them. Listen with patience and without judgment.

Accept their feelings. You can help by accepting whatever feelings—anger, guilt, sadness, hope, fear—your colleague is experiencing at the moment. Don't focus on whether they are feeling the right emotions; it is good to experience the range of our emotions when we are distressed, to assist in coping with such a difficult situation.

Ask how they are doing. Colleagues sometimes think that “bringing it up” will remind the person of their worst fears and maybe cause more pain. But most people whose loved ones are ill will suggest that their worries about the ill family member are often uppermost in their minds. If it is too painful to speak about their situation, they will likely let you know. Most will be grateful you cared enough to ask.

Be patient. Regardless of the outcome, serious illness transforms lives. Your colleague might not return to their usual self for a long time. Be patient, and realize there will be many ups and downs, mood swings and behavioral changes. Your listening and presence over the course of many months could make a huge difference.

Ask if you are helpful. It is always good practice to check with your affected colleague whether your concerns, questions and presence are helpful. If you get the impression that the person needs more privacy, his or her own space, be very respectful of that.

Understand the need for a balanced response. Take the advice of author Henri Nouwen: “The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not-knowing, not-curing, not-healing and face with us the reality of our powerlessness, that is the friend who cares.”